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William Blake

Seer, Poet, & Artist

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The object of these brief sketches on the "Christian Mystics," is to arouse interest in a subject but little known and still less understood. It is hoped that they may lead to a deeper study of the lives and works of those men and women whose influence on the world has been far greater than most people imagine.

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I

WILLIAM BLAKE—THE AGE IN WHICH HE LIVED—BIRTH—PARENTAGE—POETIC AND ARTISTIC POWERS—COUNTRY RAMBLES—EARLY VISIONS—APPRENTICED AS ENGRAVER—INSTANCE OF SECOND SIGHT—MARRIES CATHERINE BOUCHER.

ENGLAND has never been overburdened with Mystics. The genius of her people has always taken a more practical turn. Yet no man is more truly entitled to that distinction than William Blake. To the ordinary man he is not only visionary but incomprehensible. He is too spiritual an artist and too mystical a poet to be readily understood. One needs almost to be born with a strong mystical instinct to sympathise with, or even understand, such a character.

His life covers the latter half of the eighteenth—or what Carlyle terms the "godless"—century, and the earlier part of the nineteenth. In such an age he re-asserted long-forgotten truths. The fire burned within him, and ever struggled to manifest itself. The light shone in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not.

Amid the gloom of a London November, in 1757—the year in which Swedenborg avers that he witnessed the Judgment in the spirit world, which was the precursor of the great changes that have since taken place in this—William Blake was born in the neighbourhood of Golden Square.

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His father, a fairly prosperous hosier, was a dissenter of a religious, though rather severe, turn of mind. Of his mother, Catherine, we know but little, though, judging from his nature, one would imagine her to have been a deeply spiritual woman. It was probably from her that he inherited his mystical tendencies.

His education was somewhat neglected—in fact, with the exception of reading and writing it was self acquired.

As a boy he was of a strangely romantic habit of mind, passing much of his time in imaginative reverie. While other boys were playing with their tops and marbles, he would be busy with his pen or pencil. At ten he was an artist, and at twelve a poet. The following verse, taken from a song written when he was not more than thirteen, shows how at that early age the poetic faculty was developing:

"How sweet I roamed from field to field
And tasted all the summer's pride,
Till I the Prince of Love beheld,
Who in the sunny beams did glide!"

But his chief delight was to ramble through the lanes and fields round Camberwell and Dulwich, in those days country villages, or over Blackheath or the Norwood Hills to the old rural town of Croydon. Sometimes he would wander away to the verdant meadows of Walton-on-Thames.

His first vision took place when he was only eight years of age. It happened while he was on Peckham Rye. He saw a company of angels in a tree the boughs of which were bright with their wings. On his return home he told his father, who, but for the mother's intercession, would have thrashed him for telling a lie. Her deeper spirituality enabled her to recognise as

true that which his father's grosser theology failed to comprehend. Lacking insight, he denied its existence in others.

On another occasion, young William saw angels walking among the haymakers in a field.

An attempt was made to apprentice him to William Ryland, the King's engraver, but the lad took a strong objection to the man. "Father," he said, "I do not like the man's face. It looks as if he will live to be hanged." The affair fell through, which greatly pleased the boy. The idea of so highly esteemed a man as Ryland being hanged seemed not only highly improbable, but even ludicrous, for he was then at the zenith of his reputation. Twelve years later he got into difficulties and was hanged for forgery. This is a curious instance of the boy's gift of second sight.

Blake was ultimately apprenticed to an engraver named James Basire. He worked industriously for some years. Much of his spare time he spent in writing poetry and drawing. He also saw visions from time to time. His apprenticeship ended in 1778, when he was twenty-one years of age, whereupon he started as an engraver and artist.

In 1782 he married Catherine Boucher. Although an illiterate woman, she made him an excellent wife. She was in full sympathy with him, entered heart and soul into all his work, and humoured him in every way.

No man probably ever found a better or truer helpmeet than Blake. Catherine worked hard, and was a most careful housewife. Without her commonsense to guide him, he would probably have starved, and we might never have seen his mystical poems and his inspired pictures. When the cupboard was bare, she would place an empty plate before

him as a gentle reminder that he must set to work again. She believed implicitly in all his visions, and even acquired the faculty, to some extent, of seeing them herself. She would even sit up with him night after night when he was under his fierce inspirations.

During the earlier part of their married life Mrs. Blake appears to have been somewhat jealous of her husband. This arose from his outspoken opinions with regard to the relations of the sexes. A warm, impulsive, and affectionate nature like his naturally bubbled over with love. This seems to have made her suspicious. But as she came to know and understand him better her jealousy subsided, and they passed their lives together in perfect happiness.

II

BLAKE'S FIRST POEM PRINTED—STARTS IN BUSINESS — DEATH OF HIS BROTHER ROBERT — MOVES TO POLAND STREET — SONGS OF INNOCENCE ISSUED — HEAVEN AND HELL PUBLISHED—WARNS TOM PAINE —MOVES TO LAMBETH—PRODUCES OTHER WORKS — ADAM AND EVE INCIDENT — A GHOST — PUBLISHES SONGS OF EXPERIENCE BESIDES FURTHER WRITINGS — REMOVES TO FELPHAM—TRIED FOR HIGH TREASON—RETURNS TO LONDON.

DURING the year 1783 Blake's first volume of verse, "Poetical Sketches," was printed. An attempt was made about this time to lionise him, but as he resented it it was short-lived.

On the death of his father, in 1784, Blake went into business with a former fellow-apprentice. But he was too much of a dreamer to take kindly to it, and after a few years the venture came to an end.

In 1787 he lost his younger brother Robert. William tended him day and night, and at his death saw "the released spirit of his brother ascend heavenward through the matter-of-fact ceiling, clapping its hands for joy." Although absent from the body Robert still continued to visit and converse with William.

Blake now moved to Poland Street, Oxford Street, where he remained five years. He had, by his outspokenness, offended his patrons, and was unable to command the

services of either printer or publisher. In this dilemma he discovered—or rather had revealed to him by his deceased brother Robert, who appeared to him—a method by which he could multiply, not only his artistic designs in various colours, but also letterpress copies of his poems.

In 1789 he issued "Songs of Innocence," and shortly after "The Book of Thel," a strange mystical allegory.

The following year "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" was published. It seems to have been suggested by Swedenborg's "Heaven and Hell." In it Blake expresses himself rather strongly regarding that seer. He writes, "Any man of mechanical talents may from the writings of Paracelsus or Jacob Bœhme produce ten thousand volumes of equal value with Swedenborg's." Although this utterance of Blake's is far too sweeping, for Swedenborg was undoubtedly a very great seer, still it is quite possible to overrate him.

The key to the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" is contained in the following sentences: "Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil, Good is Heaven, Evil is Hell." The capacity for enjoyment necessarily involves the capacity for pain.

During the year 1792 Blake met Tom Paine at a friend's house. He warned him against returning home, telling him that if he did he would be a dead man. Paine acted upon his advice and started at once for France. Scarcely had he set sail from Dover when an order was received from the Government to

detain him. This is one instance, out of many that might be cited, of Blake's prevision.

In 1793 Blake removed to Hercules Buildings, Lambeth, where he spent the next seven years of his life. From here he issued a singularly beautiful little volume entitled "The Gates of Paradise." It contains seventeen emblematical designs with an explanatory verse attached to each, and is weird and mystical throughout. "Visions of the Daughters of Albion" and "America, a Prophecy," appeared next.

At this period of his life Blake made the acquaintance of Thomas Butts, who became, and remained so for nearly thirty years, a most generous patron.

On one occasion Butts unexpectedly entered Blake's garden, and found him sitting in his little summer house with his wife. They were both nude, for they had just been reciting "Paradise Lost" in character. On Butts appearing surprised, Blake simply remarked "It's only Adam and Eve, you know." The whole thing seemed perfectly natural to a mind guileless and innocent like his.

It was while he was living at Hercules Buildings that Blake saw, for the only time in his life, a ghost. He describes it as "a horrible grim figure, scaly, speckled, very awful," stalking towards him. He was so frightened that he ran out of the house.

Blake drew a distinction between ghosts and visionary beings. Ghosts, he maintained, seldom appeared to imaginative men. It was to common minds, who did not see the finer spirits, that they became visible. A ghost was a thing seen by the gross bodily eye; a vision by the mental. The latter is on a much higher level than the former.

In 1794 "Songs of Experience" was issued. "Europe, a Prophecy," followed. It contained a remarkable frontispiece, entitled "The Ancient of Days," which was inspired by a vision Blake once had, and which left a powerful impression on his mind. "The Book of Urizen" next made its appearance.

"The Song of Los," dealing symbolically with the various religions and philosophies, came out in 1795. The same year saw also "The Book of Ahania."

Blake now obtained a good deal of illustrative work from various publishers. He was thus in comparatively easy circumstances, having plenty to do, though by no means wealthy. Still out of his little he assisted others.

In 1800 he moved to Felpham, near Bognor in Sussex, whither he had been invited by the poet Hayley to assist him in his work. He remained there four years. It was the only part of his life passed in the country.

The change to the quiet seclusion of the country was at first delightful to Blake. By the sea shore he held visionary conversations with Moses, the old Hebrew prophets, Homer, Dante, Milton and others. He worked at his engravings and lived quietly in his cottage until an unfortunate incident occurred. A drunken soldier broke into his little garden, and, in the scuffle which ensued, and which ended in the soldier being thrown out, Blake made use of rather emphatic language. The soldier, bent on revenge, with the assistance of a comrade hatched up a story that Blake had been guilty of seditious language, whereupon he had to take his trial for high treason. Hayley appeared as a witness and Blake was acquitted.

But this incident in conjunction with other things disturbed the peaceful flow of his life at Felpham. Blake was too pure and honest to barter his independence, or the exercise of his imaginative faculty, for patronage or money. Had he done so he might have made his fortune, but he refused. His relationship with Hayley became strained. The latter was incapable of fully appreciating Blake's work. Lacking mystical insight he failed to understand him.

At length, after a sojourn of four years in the country, Blake returned to London and took up his abode at South Molton Street, where he remained for seventeen years. He was so open to the spirit world that it seems to have been almost a matter of indifference to him where he lived. The change from the quiet of the country to the noise of London troubled him but little.

III

BLAKE PUBLISHES JERUSALEM—ILLUSTRATES BLAIR'S GRAVE — SHARP PRACTICE OF CROMEK—EARNS A PRECARIOUS LIVELIHOOD—HIS SPIRITUAL VISITORS—MOVES TO FOUNTAIN COURT—ILLUSTRATES THE BOOK OF JOB—POVERTY—DEATH.

BLAKE now issued "Jerusalem" and "Milton," two wonderful books. Speaking of the former, he says, "I have written this poem from immediate dictation: twelve, or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without premeditation, and even against my will." Elsewhere he adds, "I may praise it, since I do not pretend to be other than the secretary: the authors are in eternity."

Blake now fell into sad straits, he and his wife being "reduced so low as to be obliged to live on half-a-guinea a week." A dealer named Cromek, who was a keen business man, happened to see some of Blake's drawings. Thinking to make a handsome profit out of the artist's needs, he agreed to pay Blake twenty guineas for twelve drawings of Blair's "Grave," a paltry sum for what Gilchrist styles "the most original designs of the century." To supplement this inadequate remuneration, Cromek promised Blake that he should engrave them, for which he was to be paid. But he engaged someone else. As it was only a verbal agreement, Blake, although greatly incensed, was powerless.

But this was not the worst. Unable to obtain a finished sketch from Blake of a drawing of "Chaucer's Pilgrims on the road

to Canterbury," in order that he might employ another artist to engrave it—for Blake was not to be caught that way a second time—Cromek suggested the subject to Stothard, and offered him sixty guineas for an oil painting of it. Blake, in his innocence, had allowed Cromek to see his unfinished sketch, upon which the latter pilfered the artist's ideas. When Blake saw how matters stood, his indignation at Cromek's treachery knew no bounds.

Blake found other friends, and continued to produce further designs. Some—especially his "Illustrations to Blair's Grave"—are very mystical. The invisible world was a reality to Blake, which he was always striving to express visibly.

For some years he earned a precarious livelihood. Often unable to find a publisher, the bulk of his writings never got beyond the manuscript stage. But he would console himself by remarking, "Well, it is published elsewhere, and beautifully bound." That which our earthly mankind failed to appreciate was valued and preserved in the invisible world.

At length Blake was introduced to John Varley, an astrologer. He was an implicit believer in Blake's visions, and a close friendship sprang up between them. Blake would often, at Varley's request, make sketches of his spiritual visitors. At times he had to wait for the vision: at others it would come at will. Sometimes, in the midst of drawing, he would suddenly leave off and exclaim, "I can't go on—it is gone! I must wait till it returns." They included all kinds of historical and even fabulous persons. One of the most remarkable is the "Ghost of a Flea," a human head and face in the likeness of a flea.

In 1821 Blake moved to Fountain Court,

Strand. One of his last productions was a series of twenty-one watercolour drawings illustrating the "Book of Job." These are among the loftiest, noblest, and most original of his designs. He was now approaching seventy, and on the verge of want. Thanks to the artist Linnell, the "Job" series provided a means of subsistance when all others failed. He engaged Blake to execute and engrave a duplicate set.

Towards the end of his life Blake was in the habit of spending Sunday with Linnell at Hampstead, where he used to meet a congenial circle. He would open his soul more freely to the young than to their elders. The bond of sympathy between them and Blake was stronger. Their minds were less set and rigid than those of the older men.

Blake's health now began to fail rapidly, though he continued his labours of love as long as breath lasted. Towards the end he was bolstered up in bed to enable him to finish his drawings. His physical powers gradually failed, but his mind remained strong and clear to the last. At length, on Palm Sunday, August 12th, 1827, at the age of sixty-nine, his released spirit entered the invisible world. A humble woman who was present at his death said, "I have been at the death, not of a man, but of a blessed angel."

A friend wrote a few days later, "Just before he (Blake) died his countenance became fair, his eyes brightened, and he burst into singing of the things he saw in heaven. In truth he died like a saint."

His body was laid in a common grave in Bunhill Fields, but the spot cannot now be identified. He was one of those of whom the world was not worthy.

IV

PERSONAL APPEARANCE—CHARACTER—AN APPRECIATION—SECRET OF BLAKE'S HAPPINESS.

BLAKE was somewhat short in stature, though broad-shouldered, upright, and well-made. His bearing was dignified. He possessed a massive head, and had "wonderful eyes," bright, spiritual and visionary. His conversation was delightful, kindling his listeners' imagination until nature herself seemed spiritualised.

In spite of his poverty Blake always looked a gentleman. His clothes, though old, were neat. Often down to his last shilling his faith never wavered. He always believed that his needs would be supplied, and they were.

As an instance of his loving thoughtfulness, when he and his wife were getting old, he would light the fire and boil the kettle "before his Katie awoke." Still, while he was one of the gentlest and most lovable of men, he was inflexible where truth was concerned.

All who knew Blake loved him. Those who knew him best loved him most. One of his most intimate friends writes of him "Blake once known could never be forgotten. His knowledge was various and extensive. . . . In him you saw at once the Maker, the Inventor, one of the few in any age. . . . He was a man without a mask. . . . Above the tricks

of littleness, or the least taint of affectation; loving to be with little children, and to talk about them. . . . He thought no one could be truly great who had not humbled himself, 'even as a little child.' . . . He united freedom of judgment with reverence for all that is great. . . . He fervently loved the Christian Art. . . . He was fond of the works of Saint Theresa, and often quoted them with other writers on the interior life. . . . The Bible, he said, was the Book of liberty, and Christianity the sole regenerator of nations. In politics a Platonist, he put no trust in demagogues. . . . He had great powers of argument, and on general subjects was a very patient and good-tempered disputant, but materialism was his abhorrence. . . . He was one of the few to be met with in our passage through life who are not in some way or other 'double-minded.' . . . Moving apart in a sphere above the attraction of worldly honours he did not accept greatness but conferred it. He ennobled poverty and . . . made two small rooms in Fountain Court more attractive than the threshold of princes."

External discords vanished before the spiritual harmony of such a man. He was rich in the midst of his poverty. He would sometimes say of those who had their full share of this world's goods, and who expressed pity for him, "They pity me, but 'tis they who are the just objects of pity: I possess my visions and peace; they have bartered their birthright for a mess of pottage." Had he wished he could have attained fame and fortune; but he chose the things which the world could neither give nor take away. His spiritual vision more than compensated for his lack of worldly goods.

Like all true Mystics Blake never loved money, though he was always careful with it.

The following story, told by a lady of her first and only interview with Blake, throws a flood of light on the secret of his happiness. As a child she was introduced to him. He looked at her pretty face for a time without speaking, then, stroking her head gently, said, "May God make this world to you, my child, as beautiful as it has been to me!" She wondered at the time how the world could ever have been as beautiful to the poor shabbily-dressed old man as it was to her, nursed in luxury; but in after years she came to understand plainly enough what he meant.

V

BLAKE'S CHRISTIANITY — FORGIVENESS OF SINS — THE HUMAN FORM DIVINE — THE DIVINE IMAGE — PRE-EXISTENCE — THE SPIRIT WITHIN THE LETTER — INTERNAL CONVICTION OF TRUTH — SPIRITUAL THINGS SPIRITUALLY DISCERNED — NATURE WORSHIP ATHEISTIC.

THE corner-stone of Blake's Christianity was "forgiveness of sins." He beautifully expresses this in the following lines:

"Mutual forgiveness of each vice,
Such are the Gates of Paradise,
Against the Accuser's chief desire
Who walked among the stones of fire.
Jehovah's fingers wrote the law:
He wept! then rose in zeal and awe,
And in the midst of Sinai's heat,
Hid it beneath His Mercy Seat.
O Christians! Christians! tell me why
You rear it on your altars high?"

This truth—too seldom recognised—is the clue which unravels the tangled web of existence. Following it in his childlike faith and innocence, Blake penetrated right to the very heart of the universe, where he found God to be not a vague impersonal abstraction but a personal loving Parent. He quotes with approval the words of Lavater: "He who adores an impersonal God, has none; and without guide or rudder launches on an im-

mense abyss, that first absorbs his powers and next himself."

Blake saw that the visible form of God must ever be the "human form divine." If the Highest seemed otherwise it arose from defective vision and lack of knowledge. The Supreme reveals Himself to man as man, in order that He may be understood by man. It is only by realising his kinship with God that man can rise to his highest dignity. The loftiest flights of speculation will never carry him there. The true Mystic ever sees the Divine in the human, as Blake did when he wrote that exquisite little poem:

"THE DIVINE IMAGE.

To mercy, pity, peace, and love,
All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For mercy, pity, peace, and love,
Is God our Father dear;
And mercy, pity, peace, and love,
Is man, His child and care.

For mercy has a human heart;
Pity, a human face;
And love, the human form divine;
And peace, the human dress.

To every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, mercy, pity, peace.

And all must love the human form
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
Where mercy, love, and pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too."

Blake believed in a pre-existent state. He once said, "We are all co-existent with God; members of the Divine Body and partakers of the Divine Nature."

Like all Mystics, he understood the Bible spiritually. He was a transcendental, not a literal Christian. The "mere moral law" was to him the letter that killeth. He held that all who believed in the historical Christ apart from the Christ within, in reality denied Him.

With Blake every idea had a spiritual reality underlying it. Mere mechanical science was abhorrent to his soul. He held that education —as generally understood—was the crowning Sin. It was the "eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil."

He asserted, "I know what is true by internal conviction—a doctrine is stated, my heart tells me it must be true." Every Mystic will attest the truth of this assertion. What are called the external evidences of religion carry no conviction whatever to the unlearned man. He cannot understand them. The heart, not the head, must ever be the judge with such. Even with the intellectually learned internal conviction is the only means whereby truth can be ultimately known as a certainty.

Blake maintained that it was wrong to try to explain to the *Reason* that which it could not comprehend. He was aware that spiritual things must be spiritually discerned. No amount of mere intellectual reasoning will ever reveal super-intellectual truths.

There is one line in Blake's "Jerusalem" which gives the key-note to his philosophy. It runs as follows:—"For all things exist in the human imagination." With him the

human imagination was the great creative power, the real and eternal world, the *substance* from which the external visible universe, which is but a faint shadow of it, proceeds.

Creation is the manifestation of the Imagination of God. God imagined, and creation arose.

All things are formed by the imagination. Thus: a man first imagines, or pictures in his mind, a box; then proceeds to produce it externally. Although the box may to all outward appearances be destroyed, it cannot be so in reality, for it still exists in the mind, or imagination, of the man who made it, and can be reproduced at will.

Imagination is the faculty by means of which we see heavenly things. It is the divine vision, not merely the more refined earthly sight, whereby the natural man sees astral things.

Blake held that all men might have the visionary faculty if they would. It was not necessarily peculiar to the few.

The worship of nature was, to his mind, atheism. He declared it to be the work of the devil. This statement contains a profound truth. Nature, as we know it, is a perversion of God's handiwork, which hides and distorts, as much as it reveals, Him; having been, as it were, deflected by the powers of evil.

It is useless trying to methodise or pack away in labelled compartments Blake's theology. It is on too spiritual a basis. The intellect of itself is powerless to grasp it—love alone can understand his faith.

VI

SELECTIONS FROM BLAKE'S POETRY — THE TIGER — THE WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY — INSIGHT — ARTISTIC DESIGNS — THE ANCIENT OF DAYS — THE BOOK OF JOB.

THE following selections will give some idea of Blake's poetry. It is not so much the style—which varies considerably—as the thoughts conveyed. One of his finest pieces is

"THE TIGER

Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forest of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Framed thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burned that fire within thine eyes?
On what wings dared he aspire?
What the hand dared seize the fire?

And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
When thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand formed thy dread feet?

What the hammer, what the chain,
Knit thy strength and forged thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dared thy deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did He smile His work to see?
Did He who made the lamb make thee?"

In this last line we have the key. It reveals Blake's insight into the cause of the terrible nature of the tiger, who is typical of all evil creatures. While the tiger proceeded from the Divine Mind, lovely in form, harmonious in nature, and perfectly adapted for its use, the powers of darkness perverted and turned to evil purposes those qualities which God originated for good. The tiger has partaken in the effects of the fall.

In "On Another's Sorrow," Blake grasps the infinite humanity of the Highest. After singing that God suffers in humanity, he goes on :—

"He doth give His joy to all:
He becomes an infant small,
He becomes a man of woe,
He doth feel the sorrow too."

The ensuing from "The Woman Taken in Adultery," which forms part of "The Everlasting Gospel," is very beautiful :—

"Jesus sat in Moses' chair;
They brought the trembling woman there;
Moses commands she be stoned to death;
What was the sound of Jesus' breath?
He laid His hand on Moses' law:
The ancient heavens, in silent awe,
Writ with curses from pole to pole,
All away began to roll.
The earth trembling and naked lay,
In secret bed of mortal clay,
And she heard the breath of God
As she heard it by Eden's flood:—
'To be good only, is to be
A God, or else a Pharisee.

. . . . . .

Still the breath Divine doth move,

And the breath Divine is Love.
Woman, fear not ; let me see
The seven devils that trouble thee ;
Hide not from my sight thy sin,
That full forgiveness thou may'st win.
Hath no man condemned thee ?'

'No man, Lord.'

'Then what is he
Who shall accuse thee ?'"

To Blake's vision nature was a transparent veil through which spirit was visible. He possessed not only *onsight* but *insight*. Unlike Peter Bell to whom a primrose was a yellow flower and nothing more, love enabled him

" To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour."

He held the clue which leads from earth to heaven.

" I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven's gate,
Built in Jerusalem wall."

Perhaps the best known verse in all Blake's writings is :

" I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land."

It is impossible to describe Blake's artistic designs verbally, still any account of him would be very incomplete were they ignored.

One of the grandest is "The Ancient of Days." In this we have the picture of

a Being of vast antiquity and Titanic strength, coming forth through the circle of eternity, surrounded by whirlwind and flame. In His hand He holds a pair of compasses which He projects into the depths of space.

Some of the designs to the book of Job are very wonderful. The fifth reveals Job and his wife sitting side by side bereft of nearly all they once possessed. Above is heaven, where the Almighty sits enthroned, with an expression of the utmost compassion on his face. The angels shrink in horror as Satan compresses the fires of God into a phial to be poured on Job's devoted head. In the eighth we see Job covered with sores, cursing the day he was born. The fourteenth is probably one of the finest designs in Christian Art. God speaks out of His omnipotence, " When the morning stars sang together, and all the Sons of God shouted for joy," all pictured surrounding His own glorified Image, while Job, his wife and friends kneel in ecstasy. In the fifteenth we have a remarkable picture of Behemoth and Leviathan. In the seventeenth the Almighty bestows His blessing on Job, who prays before an altar from which a heart-shaped flame rises. The series culminates in a scene of music and joy.

Some of the female figures are very beautiful. There is nothing ascetic about them. They combine a vigour of body with a glory of soul full of living fire which is truly delightful.

VII

WAS BLAKE INSANE?—ART AND INSPIRATION —BLAKE'S TWOFOLD LIFE—SAINTLY, BUT NOT SANCTIMONIOUS—CONCLUSION.

IT has been asserted that Blake was mad. Many of his poems are looked upon as the incoherencies of insanity, and his visions as the vagaries of a disordered mind. The same has been said of others. Like the old Hebrew prophet seers, he expressed himself at times in language incomprehensible to the average man. Directly the Mystic steps beyond the ordinary consciousness, he becomes liable to misconception. Swedenborg—whose sanity was never doubted on other matters—was considered insane when he claimed second sight. Theresa's visions were attributed to the fancies of a hysterical woman. Christ himself was said to have a devil. The ordinary man is too apt to put down as mad those whom he cannot understand; while the materialist even goes so far as to deny everything which is outside the range of his limited comprehension.

Anyone who expressed himself as Blake did at the time he lived was considered more or less insane. The capacity for seeing visions, so far from being an evidence of insanity, is rather the reverse. Had man not fallen, spirit vision would have been coterminous with the human race.

Blake's wife, whose level-headedness no one doubted, all but worshipped her husband.

Thomas Butts, the practical business man, was his life-long friend and patron; while Tom Paine, Cromek, and Hayley—three very different characters—were at one in regard to his perfect sanity.

Gilchrist, who wrote his life, says, "So far as I am concerned, I would infinitely rather be mad with William Blake than sane with nine-tenths of the world. . . . Does not the hero or prophet always seem mad to the respectable mob, and to the polished men of the world, the motives of feeling and action being so alien and incomprehensible."

Blake used to speak in the most matter-of-fact way of his spiritual visitors. They were realities visible to him by means of what he called Imagination. They belonged to the higher spheres, and were not simply ghosts or spooks. Imagination, he maintained, was a faculty all might possess if only they would cultivate it rightly.

In conversing with spirits, to Blake's ear the language was English. Although the spirit might be speaking in a different tongue, the sound assumed the form of speech adapted to the hearer, as it did with the Apostles on the day of Pentecost.

Blake maintained that in becoming an artist he did so by command from on High. His art was inspired and Christian. He elevated painting to the spiritual altitudes attained by some poets and musicians.

He writes, "A warlike state never can produce art. It will rob, and plunder, and accumulate into one place, and translate, and copy, and buy and sell, and criticize, but not make."

Blake desired only to work for love, not profit, and in so doing was quite happy.

He held that Jacob Bœhme was divinely inspired, but Bacon, Locke, and Newton were teachers of atheism. They were unable to rise above the intellectual plane. They never—like Bœhme—penetrated the Holy of Holies.

Blake was as much open to the invisible as to the visible world. He lived, as it were, a double life, reflecting both the good and the evil of the unseen.

The man of the world who prides himself on his common sense despises such as Blake. He looks upon him as a mere dreamer, little thinking that the material things in which he puts his trust are but the passing shadows of hidden realities.

Blake, although saintly, was not sanctimonious. His spirituality took a robust—not merely a sentimental—form. He was outspoken and unconventional.

Slowly but surely, as mankind comes to understand him, will he be recognised and appreciated.

We cannot do better than close this brief sketch of his life by quoting his own words, which reveal the man's nature.

"I assert, for myself, that I do not behold the outward creation, and that to me it is hindrance and not action. 'What!' it will be questioned, 'when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?' 'Oh! no, no! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!' I question not my corporeal eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look *through* it and *not with* it."

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